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RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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OSD FOR SHIVERS
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SUBJECT: PRT/SHARANA: PAKTIKA GOVERNOR ON SPRING OFFENSIVE

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Paktika's Governor Khpalwak has launched his own political spring offensive designed to preempt a widely expected Taliban offensive in southeastern Afghanistan. Starting on March 18, the Governor has been in near constant motion around the province. The Governor's agenda included hosting an Islamic New Year's party for thousands in Sharana, speaking at several government construction groundbreaking ceremonies, inspecting Taliban prisoners and captured equipment, and speaking directly to district tribal Shuras as well as to the national and international press. Strongly bolstered by new construction projects from PRT Sharana, Governor Khpalwak has taken to the road and to the airwaves to get his and the GOA's message out to the people prior to any major Taliban activity. END SUMMARY

WHEN THE ROCKS WARM UP THE TALIBAN COME OUT

12. (SBU) The Soviet forces in Afghanistan had a saying, "when the rocks warm up the Mujahideen come out". Governor Mohammad Akram Khpalwak, aware that this now applies to the Taliban, intends to not just counter but preempt any Taliban and other insurgent spring campaign with one of his own. In recent days the Governor has conducted a whirlwind of public meetings, press events, and groundbreaking ceremonies highlighting the positive, active, and now very public role of the Afghan Provincial Government.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

13. (SBU) Governor Khpalwak began his spring political offensive on March 18 by laying the corner stone for Sharana's first AM radio station. On March 21, he presided alongside the Provincial Council Chief Nawab Waziri at the first Islamic New Year celebration in Paktika since the Taliban banned the holiday in 1996. Thousands of residents attended this popular event in Sharana's city park despite Taliban threats that had prevented the event in years past. Khpalwak also spoke to large audiences at an opening of the

school year event on March 22. On March 23, he presided over the groundbreaking ceremony for Sar Hawza district's government and police center as well as the district's first girls school. Responding to an unsuccessful Taliban attack on an Afghan National Army and coalition base in Gayan district, the Governor along with two members of the Provincial Council traveled to the district on March 25 where they spoke with and displayed captured weapons and personnel for the local tribal Shura and national press. Finally, on March 26, the Governor spoke at the groundbreaking for a new school and district center in Mata Khan district.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Governor Khpalwak has recently embraced the Provincial Council and is rarely seen in public without the Council's Chairman, Dr. Nawab Waziri. His strong ties to the Council, along with his many recent public addresses afforded by the groundbreaking ceremonies of some eleven PRT building projects, have helped to strengthen the Governor's influence with the people. His publicity offensive is continuing with additional school openings and two large tribal shuras scheduled in April. It is too early to tell what effect the expected Taliban offensive will have in Paktika. The Taliban attack in Gayan on 24 March was a stunning Taliban military and publicity failure. Governor Khpalwak's recent actions have now clearly put the Taliban on notice that they are not the only ones vying for power and influence in Paktika province. END COMMENT

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